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Comic Realism: The Humour of Everyday Indian Life in *Learn from the Almond Leaf* by Eunice de Souza

Barsha Sahoo

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Abstract

This paper examines Learn from the Almond Leaf by Eunice de Souza through the critical lens of comic realism, focusing on how humour becomes a tool to represent the textures of everyday Indian life. De Souza's comic realism emerges from her sharp observation of ordinary experiences--family relations, religious practices, gender norms, and middle-class anxieties-rendered with irony, wit, and understated satire. Rather than offering escapist humour, her poems expose social hypocrisies and emotional contradictions embedded in quotidian life. Drawing on theories of comic realism and satire, the study argues that de Souza employs humour to negotiate serious concerns such as patriarchy, urban alienation, and cultural conformity. The laughter generated by her poetry is thus ambivalent, functioning both as critique and resistance. By blending realism with comedy, Learn from the Almond Leaf situates personal experience within broader social realities, affirming humour as a powerful mode of socio-cultural commentary in contemporary Indian English poetry.

Comic realism is different from comic books, which present art and literature at one glance. Comic realism in poetry is the combining of comedy elements in the creation of poems on topics that are grounded in reality. Eunice De Souza has mastered the art of comic realism in her later poetry collections, such as *Learn from the Almond Leaf* (2016). In this short poetry collection, she has mocked or made fun of incidents taken from ordinary life in India. Be it on the rising global warming and pollution due to Indian people's activities, or the misfits of the cultural Indian society, such as dogs and crows, or making fun of her single Indian woman status. She uses wit, satire, humour, and irony as forms of comedy in her poems. Her poetry uses sharp wit, irony, and mundane detail to expose the contradictions of urban Indian middle-class life, gender expectations, and institutional religion—making humour a vehicle for social and ethical critique rather than mere amusement.

In "*Learn from the Almond Leaf,*" Eunice de Souza employs comic realism as a mode that fuses everyday realism with irony and understated humour to critique the social structures governing middle-class Indian life. Rather than relying on exaggeration or farce, De Souza grounds her poetry in familiar domestic, religious, and social routines, allowing humour to emerge from the recognition of normalized absurdities within lived reality.

Satire is a form of comedy that is used to ridicule or express the shortcomings of society. In ancient Indian literature, satire is considered an important element or "rasa". Even in Dalit literature, satire was useful in expressing their discontent with the Indian caste system and the "untouchable rule". In the Indian context, it has functioned not merely as a literary device but also as a powerful medium through which ordinary people articulate dissent and channel

collective anger against oppressive structures of power (Wikipedia contributors).

Eunice de Souza's poetry often satires the shortcomings of Indian society through poetry and fiction. Particularly in *Learn from the Almond Leaves* she presents the raw image of an Indian city called Mumbai. The Mithi River that runs through Mumbai is full of garbage littered by the urban population. In the religious festival of Hindus, kite flying often harms the bird life in the city. Mumbai is one of the few Indian cities where it's hot throughout the year, the reason being global warming through overpopulation, and too many concrete spaces. In the book, she also explains how rats are worshipped in temples, yet nobody worships crows as the cleaners of the city, as they eat roadkill, which actually keeps the urban streets clean. At last, she jokes about death and her spinsterhood status in life, something which is unacceptable in Indian patriarchal society. It is clearly stated in the article "*Eunice de Souza***:** *A Critical Biography"* by Saradindu Bhattacharya:

"De Souza's mode of representing the world around her is consistently satirical, demonstrating an unsparing criticism of normalized forms of oppression in society that the reader is called upon to confront, not through overt moral cues offered by the poet (she does not offer any) but by means of sharing with her a common knowledge of *how* that world functions." (Indian Writing in English - an Institution of Eminence Project).

In the third poem of the book *Learn from the Almond Leaf,* titled "Kite Season," de Souza talks about how the ritual of the kite flying festival in January, known as Makar Sankranti by Hindus, actually harms the ecosystem. The glass power used in the strings of the kite may injure birds who get tangled in the kite strings. Glass power is a common method used by kite flyers to cut the strings of other kites and win the match of flying kites. She presents a common sight imagery writing,

> "…the trees are festooned with birds/ hanging by a wing/ an entangled leg/ glass-coated string." (*Learn from the Almond Leaf,* pg 3)

In the poem "Close on the Heels," she jokes about God not having mercy on Mumbai citizens and that it's humid all seasons round, even in October, November, and December. She might indicate the presence of global warming in one of the crowded cities of India. (*Learn from the Almond Leaf*, pg. 5).

De Souza's wit is rarely playful; instead, it is dry, restrained, and often unsettling, compelling readers to confront uncomfortable social truths beneath the surface of the ordinary. A defining feature of de Souza's humour is her use of understatement. She frequently presents emotionally charged or oppressive situations in a flat, conversational tone, allowing irony to emerge implicitly. This stylistic choice mirrors the silencing and normalization of patriarchal authority in domestic spaces. The humour arises from the disjunction between what is said and what is experienced, creating a quiet but powerful critique of social expectations imposed on women. In the poem "Tell Me," She writes:

> "Tell me, Mr. Death/ Date. Time. Place. /I have to look for my life of sin panties, / Make an appointment/ For a pedicure." (*Learn from the Almond Leaf*, pg- 23)

Another example of her dry humour is when she does not spare her dog, and her neighbours' dislike of keeping pets in her apartment block. The article "Eunice De Souza, the Cult Guru Who Rocked" Susan Abraham writes, "Her love for the animals around her was legendary. The two dogs who strayed into her house and stayed there, and her parrot, Mr De Souza, will be bereft without her. She had stopped travelling outside the city because they would not be able to take it. She found absolute unconditional love in all the street dogs around her, and so she would feed them and nurse them during their injuries and illnesses, much to the chagrin of the members of her middle-class housing society. It is those who lived in the slums around her colony who understood her the most, she would say." (Abraham). Eunice de Souza writes in the poem "For the Love of Lout, my Dog":

> "…A sniffer of crotches. / The good ladies of the neighbourhood/ Avoid him. So do the men. / He knows too many secrets." (*Learn from the Almond Leaves*, pg 10)

Religious orthodoxy, particularly Catholic moral discipline, is another recurrent target of de Souza's humour. Rather than attacking faith directly, she satirizes the hypocrisy and repression embedded in institutionalized religion. Through ironic references

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to confession, sin, guilt, and surveillance of female sexuality, her poetry exposes how religious doctrine often reinforces fear and control rather than compassion. This aligns with the Indian tradition of *vyaṅgya*, where suggestion and implication carry sharper critical force than explicit condemnation. In a poem like "Rats," she says that rats and snakes are worshipped in temples by Hindus, but crows, even being a holy symbol, are not worshipped. They clean the cities by eating the roadkill, yet they are not worshipped as rats and snakes are. She showcases Hindu hypocrisy in the name of religion. (*Learn from the Almond Leaf,* pg 18)

She satires the Indian society of Mumbai for lacking civic sense. The Mithi River, which runs through the city, is full of sewage and waste from households and industries. So much so that one cannot swim in it, or the garbage will sweep through away. She writes:

> "…The Mithi River won't let you/ Sink or swim. / It will carry you/ On a raft of garbage/ to a dying sea…" (*Learn from the Almond Leaf,* pg 13)

De Souza's humour is also deeply feminist in orientation. Poems dealing with marriage, desire, spinsterhood, and female respectability dismantle romantic ideals through sardonic observation. By mocking conventional notions of femininity and domestic virtue, she reveals how women are trained to internalize shame and compliance. Laughter in her poetry thus becomes a form of resistance—a means of reclaiming agency within restrictive social frameworks. In the poem "Moon and Star" and "The Moon is Feeling Her Age", the poet says that even the Earth's natural satellite is anticipating her glowing age and that she is getting older. In India, getting older means a woman is out of the marriageable market. Eunice de Souza was unmarried in her lifetime. (*Learn from the Almond Leaf*, pg- 32-34). In the web article titled, "*Eunice De Souza: The Woman Who Dominated The Poetry Skyline*" it is written:

"De Souza, throughout her writings, shows concern for the plight of numerous Indian women across different social contexts: a maid, a daily wage worker or an isolated 'housewife'. Her poems commonly explore the loss, alienation and isolation that accompanies womanhood." (Agarwal)

Importantly, de Souza's humour contributes to a form of comic realism. Her poems are grounded in everyday settings—homes, churches, classrooms, relationships—yet these familiar spaces become sites of quiet violence and emotional constraint. The humour does not soften reality; instead, it sharpens it. Readers are led to laugh briefly, only to recognize the seriousness of the conditions being exposed. This uneasy laughter underscores the ethical urgency of her work.

In the context of postcolonial Indian English poetry, de Souza's humour stands apart for its refusal of grand gestures or nationalist rhetoric. Her satire operates at the level of the intimate and personal, revealing how power functions through routine, language, and habit. By transforming mundane experiences into moments of ironic revelation, Eunice de Souza demonstrates how humour can serve as a potent literary strategy for social awareness and critique.

CONCLUSION

This research paper has sought to demonstrate that *Comic Realism: The Humour of Everyday Indian Life in* Learn from the Almond Leaf is not merely a stylistic descriptor but a defining aesthetic strategy through which Eunice de Souza interrogates the textures of postcolonial Indian existence. By blending humour with an unflinching realist gaze, de Souza transforms the mundane—family rituals, religious instruction, gendered expectations, and social hypocrisy—into sites of critical reflection. Her comic realism operates not as escapist laughter but as an ethical and cultural mode that exposes contradictions embedded in everyday Indian life.

The study establishes that humour in *Learn from the Almond Leaf* functions as a subversive tool rather than a decorative literary device. De Souza's wit is marked by irony, understatement, and tonal restraint, allowing her poems to critique social institutions without overt polemic. The humour often emerges from incongruity: between professed moral values and lived behaviour, between inherited traditions and individual desires, and between public respectability and private disillusionment. This incongruity generates laughter that is uneasy and

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reflective, compelling readers to recognize the absurdities normalized within domestic and social spaces. In this sense, comic realism becomes a means of cultural demystification.

A key finding of this research is that de Souza's comic realism is deeply rooted in the everyday experiences of Indian women. Her poems foreground domestic spaces, familial relationships, and religious conditioning, revealing how humour becomes a strategy of survival within restrictive social frameworks. Rather than romanticizing suffering or dramatizing rebellion, de Souza employs a dry, almost casual humour that mirrors the ordinariness of oppression itself. This approach underscores the insidious nature of patriarchy, showing how it operates through routine gestures, language, and expectations. The laughter elicited by these poems thus carries a feminist charge, exposing power structures while resisting sentimentality.

The paper also highlights the postcolonial dimensions of de Souza's humour. Her comic realism reflects the complexities of Indian identity shaped by colonial legacies, Catholic upbringing, and Western literary influences. Yet, de Souza does not replicate Western models of satire uncritically. Instead, she adapts them to an Indian context, infusing her poetry with local idioms, cultural references, and social realities. Her humour captures the tensions between tradition and modernity, faith and skepticism, obedience and autonomy—tensions that define postcolonial Indian life. Comic realism, in this sense, becomes a distinctly Indian literary mode, grounded in lived experience rather than abstract theory.

Furthermore, this study reveals that de Souza's realist humour aligns with broader debates on realism in postcolonial literature. Unlike classical realism that seeks objective representation, her comic realism acknowledges fragmentation, irony, and subjectivity. By focusing on the "small" moments of everyday life, de Souza challenges grand narratives of nationhood, progress, and cultural unity. Her poems suggest that truth often resides in the overlooked, the trivial, and the uncomfortable. Humour, therefore, becomes a way of telling truths that might otherwise remain suppressed or ignored.

In reassessing *Learn from the Almond Leaf* through the lens of comic realism, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of Eunice de Souza's poetic significance within Indian English literature. It positions her as a poet who redefines humour as a serious literary and political instrument—one that negotiates identity, critiques social norms, and resists ideological rigidity. Her work demonstrates that laughter, when rooted in realism, can be a powerful form of cultural critique.

In conclusion, Eunice de Souza's comic realism offers a nuanced and compelling vision of everyday Indian life—one that refuses both romantic idealization and overt cynicism. Through humour that is sharp yet controlled, intimate yet socially resonant, *Learn from the Almond Leaf* reveals the quiet absurdities and persistent injustices that shape ordinary existence. This study affirms that de Souza's humour is ultimately an act of literary courage: a refusal to remain silent in the face of hypocrisy, and a reminder that the comic can be as revelatory and transformative as the tragic in articulating human experience.

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[6] Barsha Sahoo is a PhD Scholar at Gandhi Institute of Engineering and Technology University, Gunupur, Odisha, India. She is also a (SSB)lecturer in English at BC Sanskrit College, Kujang, Jagatsinghpur, Odisha, India.

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